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THE COMMERCIAL CURRICULUM IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

I. SOME PRESENT CONDITIONS

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Added to the growing interest in business study has come a new interest inspired by the war. In these days a new light has been cast upon almost every phase of social organization, and none has been more clearly illumined than the intimate relation between the problems of citizenship and the problems of business. Far more than before we see the degree in which these problems are the same problems. A natural result of our new vision is a new interest in studies which will clarify our insight regarding the complicated web of business relations which, under the strain of new and vigorous social action, is showing itself so delicate and yet so vital. In view of the events of the past three years it is not presumptuous to declare that, whatever may make the world safe for democracy, nothing less than an electorate enlightened regarding its economic organization can make democracy safe for the world.

In casting about for ways and means—for institutions and agencies that may aid in producing this type of electorate—nothing is more obviously hopeful than the secondary school. Everyone is aware that the number who “go on” each year from high school is so small that what can be expected from the colleges is indeed limited. Making all possible allowance for possible accomplishment in the grammar grades, the function of the high school in training for citizenship, at least under our present school organization, is clear and plain.

In any program purposing to teach the social functions and implications of business, it might well be hoped that the business departments of high schools, wise with experience in business education, would be prepared to lead.

How far are the commercial courses in the American high schools prepared to assume a position of leadership in the work of teaching the basic business structure of society, a knowledge of which is vital to intelligent living and intelligent participation in social activities?

A survey of present commercial courses in high schools justifies some answers to this question.

About the first of February, 1917, the writer, working under the auspices of the School of Commerce and Administration of the University of Chicago, addressed a questionnaire to the principals of 225 high schools throughout the United States.

The high schools were taken from the report of the Commissioner of Education for 1914. To each high school, excepting high schools of commerce, which was listed as having over two hundred pupils in commercial courses, was sent a questionnaire. There were listed in the 1914 report 192 such schools. In addition to these, 33 questionnaires were sent to high schools having between one hundred and fifty and two hundred students.

Of the questionnaires sent out, 136, representing 26 of the 36 states included in the commissioner's report, were returned in time to be included in the tabulations which were made. Of these, 106 came from schools having over two hundred pupils in commercial work. In 20 cases the reports came from schools showing between one hundred and fifty and two hundred students. The reports thus represented returns from over 55 per cent of the schools of the United States which were reported as having over two hundred students in commercial work. The task of answering reasonably well the various questions asked was no small one. Yet a large proportion of the questionnaires were filled out with a care and pains that evidenced a great deal of interest in the inquiry, and this fact gives color to the belief that the data are reasonably reliable.

Commercial courses in the high schools are classified into what are commonly known as the "short course" and the "four-year course." In the material which follows these courses are considered separately.

LENGTH OF THE SHORT COURSE

Fifty-six schools in all, 41.1 per cent of those reporting, declared that a short course was offered. The length of the short course is a very variable quantity. The time ranges from one year to three years, by gradations of one-half year. The two-year course is the most popular of the short courses. Thirty-six of the 56 schools reporting short courses, that is to say 65.4 per cent, reported two-year courses. Table I shows the variation in length of the short courses.

TABLE I
VARIATION IN LENGTHS OF SHORT COURSES IN COMMERCIAL WORK
(56 Schools Reporting)

SCHOOLS REPORTING	LENGTH OF COURSES			
	3 Years	2½ Years	2 Years	1 Year
Number.....	16	1	35	8
Percentage of total.....	28.5	1.8	62.5	14.2

REQUIREMENTS OF COMMERCIAL TECHNICAL SUBJECTS

One query called for a list of subjects required of students in the commercial course. In making the tabulations the subjects were grouped according to a classification which will be explained as each group is discussed. The first classification considered was the technical subjects. This term is used to include the courses which train primarily in technical skill. The tabulations here presented refer only to the four-year course. No effort is made to summarize the technical subjects required in short courses. Stenography, typewriting, and bookkeeping predominate in these short courses. These studies are usually arranged in the way that will best fit the length of the course and largely occupy the time which is available. Under such circumstances it is obvious that a tabulation showing the variation in organization would indicate chiefly the varying length of the courses themselves. English—sometimes business English—penmanship, commercial arithmetic, and an elementary science are not infrequently included.¹ Typically,

¹ See Table IV for non-technical subjects in short courses.

however, the curricula are *prima facie* clerk mills, masquerading under the deluding name of commercial courses.

The technical requirements of the four-year course are set forth in Table II. A study of this table shows what is perhaps a surprising lack of uniformity in the length of time required for technical subjects. Inasmuch as commercial education in American public schools had its beginning in bookkeeping, which was

TABLE II
LENGTH OF TIME REQUIRED FOR TECHNICAL SUBJECTS FOR FOUR-YEAR COMMERCIAL COURSES IN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

YEARS RE- QUIRED	BOOKKEEPING		TYPEWRITING		STENOGRAPHY		COMMERCIAL ARITHMETIC	
	Schools Requiring (of 121 Reporting)		Schools Requiring (of 111 Reporting)		Schools Requiring (of 116 Reporting)		Schools Requiring (of 114 Reporting)	
	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage
$\frac{1}{2}$	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	1	0.8
$\frac{3}{4}$	4	3.3	1	0.9	1	0.8	35	30.7
$\frac{1}{2}$	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	1	0.8
1	13	11.5	15	13.8	9	7.7	72	63.1
$1\frac{1}{2}$	13	10.8	6	5.4	5	4.3	3	2.6
$1\frac{3}{4}$	1	0.83	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
2	60	49.5	54	86.6	80	68.9	2	1.7
$2\frac{1}{2}$	7	5.7	9	8.1	7	6.0	.....	.....
3	17	14.0	22	10.8	11	9.4	.....	.....
$3\frac{1}{2}$	1	0.83	1	0.9	1	0.8	.....	.....
4	4	3.3	4	3.6	2	1.7	.....	.....

shortly followed by typewriting and stenography, it might seem reasonable to believe that all matters pertaining to these subjects would be fairly well standardized. As a matter of fact, the table shows that there is considerable lack of uniformity regarding all of them. In teaching bookkeeping, for instance, the reports show that the courses range from one-half year to four years, moving by gradations of one-half year. Two years is clearly the most common period to devote to bookkeeping. Nearly one-half of the 121 schools reporting, 49.5 per cent, have fixed upon two years as the requisite time. The remaining 50 per cent vary widely. Fourteen schools, or 11.5 per cent, report that one year is given to bookkeeping. Nearly as many, 10.8 per cent of the reporting schools, have one-and-one-half-year courses, while a surprisingly large num-

ber, 14 per cent, utilize three years in the teaching of bookkeeping. Four schools, or 3.3 per cent, spread their course over four years, and the same number require only one-half year.

In typewriting the lack of uniformity is not quite so extreme. Of the 111 reporting schools, 86 per cent have fixed upon two years for their typewriting course. In this work again, however, courses vary from one-half year to four years: 13.8 per cent require only a one-year course; 5.4 per cent require typewriting for one and one-half years; slightly over 8 per cent do the work in two and one-half years; 10.8 per cent have a three-year course; and 3.6 per cent have a four-year course in typewriting.

In stenography more emphasis has been put upon the two-year period than in bookkeeping, although the two-year course has apparently not been so generally decided upon as in typewriting. Of 116 schools reporting, 68.9 per cent give two years to stenography, 7.7 per cent give their work in one year, 6 per cent in two and one-half years, 9.4 per cent require three years, and 1.7 per cent four years of training.

A total of 114 schools reported concerning the length of time required in commercial arithmetic. Of these, 72, or 63.1 per cent, give a one-year course. The half-year course is also popular, and is used by 30.7 per cent of the reporting schools. Only 2 schools reported courses in commercial arithmetic extending over a two-year period, and 3 schools require one and one-half years.

The lack of uniformity which exists in the length of courses in these technical subjects, where one naturally expects a considerable degree of standardization, is indicative of the uncertainty that seems to pervade commercial education in high schools. There is some reason to believe that it is administrative reasons that have emphasized the two-year period in bookkeeping, stenography, and typewriting. Business colleges throughout the country give much briefer courses in these technical subjects, and so far as the technical training is concerned they appear to produce a product quite equal to that which graduates from the public high school. There is nothing to indicate that the same work could not be accomplished in as brief a time in high schools. What is perhaps more to the point, there is nothing to indicate that a careful study has

been made to determine the length of time which is necessary for the acquirement of proficiency in these technical subjects. It is common conversation among school people that they fit well into the two-year system, yet the reports indicate that certain schools believe that they can be fitted into other systems. Noticeably lacking is a standard time for courses, based on careful experiment in teaching these technical subjects.

SUBJECTS OTHER THAN TECHNICAL

In considering subjects other than the work in technique, it appeared advisable to consider English separately. One hesitates to classify it as a technical subject, and yet it can hardly be grouped with the distinctly non-technical subjects. Of the 56 schools reporting short courses, 45 gave data on the English requirements in these courses. These data are given in Table III. This report

TABLE III
ENGLISH REQUIREMENTS OF THE SHORT COURSE
(45 Schools Reporting)

3 YEARS		2 YEARS		1 YEAR	
No. of Schools	Percentage	No. of Schools	Percentage	No. of Schools	Percentage
11	24.4	33	73.3	1	2.2

indicates that English is a subject which has secured a place even in courses so largely given to narrow utilitarian uses as the short commercial courses. A comparison of this table with Table I shows some interesting facts. That table indicates that 28.5 per cent of the schools giving short courses have three-year courses. The English data, given above, shows that almost the same percentage, 24.4 per cent, require three years of English. Of the schools reporting short courses, 62.5 per cent give two-year courses. Of the short courses reported, 73.3 per cent require two years of English. Evidently English is usually a required subject throughout the short course.

OTHER NON-TECHNICAL SUBJECTS IN THE SHORT COURSE

A consideration of the non-technical subjects other than English in the short course brings out the lamentable paucity of general

training which is given in these courses and the sorrowfully limited vision with which their graduates enter their life-work in business. In Table IV these non-technical subjects have for convenience been thrown into three groups. Subjects commonly classified as science are grouped together, but the general subjects are put into two groups. One is arbitrarily called "Social-Business Subjects," and is grouped separately because into it are put those general subjects which bear somewhat directly on the social environment of the business man and which are sometimes taught under the direction of commercial departments. The third group is termed the "General Academic" and into it are put all subjects not enumerated in the first two groups.

An examination of Table IV shows, first of all, that the short courses are not planned to do much else than train in technical practice. Of the 56 schools reporting short courses, only 13, or 22.7 per cent, require any general academic subjects; 24, or 42 per cent, require some social-business subject, and some three-quarters require something in the way of science. A closer examination of Table IV, however, reveals the extreme rarity with which any comprehensive demands are made in the fields of general training. Science has apparently made some small claim. Commercial geography, which in this discussion is classed as a science, comes most near to being a universal requirement, and yet it is a requirement in the commercial short courses in but 23 cases, 40 per cent of those reporting. Hygiene or physiology, doubtless owing to state law in many cases, has made a place for itself in 12 of the short courses, or 21 per cent of those reporting. Four schools, 7.1 per cent of those reporting, require physiography. A single school requires general science; one other requires physics or chemistry, and 2 schools require biology. This represents the meager claim which science has been able to make in the short courses, and yet its hold is more substantial than that of any group of subjects. If we turn to the social-business subjects grouped under Table IV, we find that courses of such decidedly business flavor as economics, industrial history, and history of commerce have won almost no recognition. The last two of these are required in 2 instances, which is slightly less than 4 per cent of the schools reporting. Economics is reported as required by only 1 school, 1.7 per cent of

TABLE IV
NON-TECHNICAL SUBJECTS REQUIRED IN THE SHORT COURSES—ENGLISH EXCEPTED
(56 Schools Reporting)

SCIENCE											
Commercial Geography*		Hygiene or Physiology		Physiography		General Science		Biology		Physics or Chemistry	
No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age	No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age	No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age	No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age	No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age	No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age
23	40	12	21	4	7.1	1	1.7	2	4	1	1.7
										Total Schools Requiring Science	
										No.	Percent-age
										43	76

SOCIAL-BUSINESS SUBJECTS											
Industrial History*		History of Commerce		Economics†		Civics‡		Commercial Law		Local Industry	
No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age	No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age	No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age	No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age	No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age	No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age
2	4	2	4	1	1.7	7	12	10	18	2	4
										Total Schools Requiring	
										No.	Percent-age
										24	42

GENERAL ACADEMIC											
United States History		Mediaeval and Modern History		English History		Algebra		Geometry		Modern Language‡	
No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age	No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age	No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age	No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age	No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age	No. of Schools Requiring	Percent-age
4	7.1	1	1.7	1	1.7	1	1.7	1	1.7	5	8.5
										Total Schools Requiring	
										No.	Percent-age
										13	22.7

* In five other cases commercial geography and industrial history were made optional.

† In one other case civics and economics were optional.

‡ In one other case optional with algebra or history.

those reporting. Commercial law has a somewhat stronger position, as 10 schools, that is, 18 per cent, require this subject. Civics is made a requirement in the short course by 7 schools, and "local industry" is a requirement in 2 schools.

The general academic subjects are hardly noticed by the formulators of short commercial courses. Four of these schools, 7.9 per cent, require United States history, and 5, 8.5 per cent, make some modern-language requirement. Modern and mediaeval history, English history, algebra, and geometry have, respectively, established places as required subjects in only 1 school.

THE FOUR-YEAR COURSE ENGLISH REQUIREMENTS

An examination of the English requirements in the four-year course leads to conclusions similar to those at which one arrives from the study of English in the short courses. Whatever objection against other academic subjects may be advanced by the utilitarian organizers of commercial curricula, it is plain that the need of English is admitted. A total of 115 schools reported on the English requirements in the four-year commercial course, and these reports are summarized in Table V. An examination of

TABLE V
NUMBER OF YEARS OF ENGLISH REQUIRED IN THE FOUR-YEAR COMMERCIAL COURSE
(115 Schools Reporting)

4 YEARS		3½ YEARS		3 YEARS		2 YEARS		1 YEAR	
No. of Schools	Percentage	No. of Schools	Percentage	No. of Schools	Percentage	No. of Schools	Percentage	No. of Schools	Percentage
86	74.7	6	5.2	18	15.6	4	3.4	1	0.8

this table shows that approximately three-fourths of these schools have a requirement of four years of English. Slightly over 5 per cent require three and one-half years, and nearly 16 per cent require three years, of English. But a single school limits the requirements in English to one year, and only 4 of the 115 schools reporting limit their English requirements to two years. A totaling of these percentages shows that 94.5 per cent require three years or more of English in the four-year commercial course.

OTHER NON-TECHNICAL SUBJECTS IN THE FOUR-YEAR COURSE

Table VI, which presents data gathered concerning the non-technical subjects in the four-year course (English excepted), needs a word or two of introductory explanation. It will be noted that subjects have been classified into three groups:

- a) "Subjects Dealing with Physical Environment"
- b) "Subjects Dealing Directly with Social Environment of Business"
- c) "Other Subjects"

Speaking broadly, these three headings are intended to represent science, social-commercial subjects (such as those considered in Table IV), and the general academic subjects, typically mathematics, language, and history. These headings are used because the first two signify a business point of view from which these non-technical subjects may be regarded. Any individual business enterprise must make an adjustment to the complex social relationship of which it is a part. Such social institutions as the market, financial structures, laws, and business associations combine with a multitude of other mechanisms to make an intricate social environment for a business undertaking. Certain subjects in the curriculum are an aid in making the student aware of this social environment, and in enabling him better to adjust himself to it. Specifically commercial law, civics, industrial history, and economics are perhaps the courses—as courses are now organized—most likely to accomplish these results. It would be presumptuous to assume that these courses are usually taught with the thought that has been suggested above in the mind of the teacher. They are altogether too compartmentalized and separated from one another to accomplish the good which they might. Nevertheless, consciously or unconsciously, they do give the student something of this social environment of business—something of the social-business complex in which lie the duties of a citizen.

In the same way the individual business enterprise deals with the facts of physical science and utilizes them constantly in the conduct of its affairs. Some knowledge of this physical environment to which the individual business enterprise must make an

adjustment is gained through the study of various sciences. Again it would be presumptuous to assume that these are taught from the viewpoint of their functional significance to business. Nevertheless it is impossible to teach these to commercial students without giving them the opportunity of gaining something which may be useful in making an adjustment to physical environment.

Nothing need be said in explanation of the column labeled "Other Subjects." They are, as has been suggested, typically mathematics, language, and history.

TABLE VI
SCHOOLS OFFERING AND REQUIRING NON-TECHNICAL SUBJECTS IN THE FOUR-YEAR
COMMERCIAL COURSE, ENGLISH EXCEPTED
(136 Schools Reporting)

	SUBJECTS DEALING WITH PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT (SCIENCE)		SUBJECTS DEALING DI- RECTLY WITH SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT OF BUSINESS (SOCIAL-COMMERCIAL)		OTHER SUBJECTS (GENERAL ACADEMIC)	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Schools offering to four-year commercial students (136 reporting)	114	83.0	125	91.1	105	77.2
Schools requiring in first and second years (136 reporting)	93*	61.7	30†	22.0	80	59.0
Schools requiring in third and fourth years (123 reporting)	10	8.0	106	86.1	62‡	50.4

* In 63 instances this was commercial geography only.

† The distribution in the first and second years among the subjects considered in this group was as follows:

Industrial history	10 schools	Commercial law	9 schools
Economics	4 "	History of commerce	4 "
Civics	10 "	Local industries	3 "

‡ In 29 cases United States history, or United States history and civics, was the sole requirement.

An examination of Table VI is, at first view, quite heartening to those who hope to see a broader type of education pervading the commercial course. The first column indicates that 114, or 83 per cent, of the schools replying to the questionnaire offer to commercial students courses dealing with the physical environment; 125 offer courses dealing with the social environment; while 105 offer some general academic studies. A more careful analysis,

however, shows that there is no certainty that these subjects will be taken by commercial students. The requirements in these lines of work are noticeably less than the offerings. The requirements have been divided into those which fall in the first and second years and those which fall in the third and fourth years. In the first and second years 61 per cent make some science requirement of commercial students. This is more gratifying before one realizes that in nearly two-thirds of the cases reporting requirements commercial geography is the only science required. In the first and second years only 30 schools, or 22 per cent, require commercial students to take courses dealing with the social environment in which business is conducted. These requirements, as the footnote indicates, are scattered and varied. The significance of these meager requirements in the first and second years is emphasized when one's attention is called to the large number of students in the four-year courses who do not remain in school beyond the second year. The report of the Bureau of Education for 1914-15 regarding the number and percentage of students in each year of high-school courses shows that the condition obtained which is set forth in Table VII.

TABLE VII

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS IN EACH YEAR OF PUBLIC HIGH-SCHOOL COURSES IN SCHOOLS REPORTING, 1914-15

FIRST YEAR		SECOND YEAR		THIRD YEAR		FOURTH YEAR	
Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
543,206	40.86	354,705	26.69	245,380	18.46	185,873	13.99

There are many reasons for believing that in commercial courses the percentage of students who leave during the first and second years is somewhat higher than the averages quoted in Table VII, yet this table indicates that more than 67 per cent of high-school students leave without beginning their third year's work.

In the third and fourth years science requirements fall to the low mark of 8 per cent of the reporting schools. In only 10 of the 136 schools reporting was there a science requirement in the last

two years. The studies in the social-commercial group, however, obtain a noticeable prominence in the third and fourth years. Of the schools reporting, 106, that is, 86.1 per cent, require one or more of the social-commercial groups of studies. In few cases is there much plan or organization shown in these requirements, but it is at least satisfactory to notice that there is a keen realization of the need of this type of work for business students. Apparently the tendency is to crowd this work into the last two years at the expense of science in this period, and at the expense of the first and second year. Science, on the other hand, has its strongest—almost its only—hold in the first two years.

An examination of the general subjects required in the fourth-year commercial course, shows that commercial work and academic training have not established intimate relations. In the first two years 59 per cent of the reporting schools make some requirements, and in the last two years 50 per cent require commercial students to take some general subject or subjects. Usually, however, these requirements are limited, as is shown in the case of the third and the fourth years, in which United States history, or United States history and civics, is the sole requirement.

CONCLUSIONS

Three conclusions are inevitable from a review of the data which we have been considering. The first of these conclusions is that the high-school commercial course is still dominated by heredity. It is still in the grip of its inheritance from the business colleges from which it so largely sprang. Brought into the secondary-school world to compete with private commercial education, fathered in its beginnings almost entirely by the graduates of business colleges, finding its ideals largely in an imitation of its competitors, the high-school commercial course has in great measure remained as it began—a technical training course, giving instruction in mechanical routine. In performing this function it has been encouraged by business men and business conditions. Many characteristics of business growth and change during the past fifty years have been conducive to the persistence of this type of training. The tremendous expansion of business immeasurably

multiplied the demand for clerical performance of what has been called the "facilitating process" of business. This business expansion alone might have been sufficient to keep the commercial courses in their restricted form, but added to this has come a concentration and an increase in the size of business units. The development of this aspect of modern business has decreased the opportunity for the small business entrepreneur as it has increased the opportunities for subordinates. The subordinate positions have, under modern organization, been very considerably routinized. This has been accompanied and aided by an intensive specialization in office work, comparable only to the division of labor in manufacturing processes. Thus the developing aspects of modern business have emphasized in the minds of business managers the need of clerical forces at the same time that increasing size, risk, and complexity have made industrial and commercial undertakings forbidding, if not impossible, to a great number of persons. These conditions have increased the inherent tendency of the high-school commercial course to follow its forbears.

The second conclusion derived from these data, and one that is akin to the first, is that the commercial course has never clearly allied itself with the traditional purposes of American high schools. There has been an attachment, but not a coalescence. The purpose of secondary education has been variously expressed. It has been called general; it has been called cultural; it has been called a training for citizenship. The traditional courses of the high school have been organized into various groups under various heads, but always—poor as the accomplishment may have been—the high-school function has been conceived as one of socialization. In this aim the high-school commercial course has not participated. Bound by its traditions and encouraged by circumstances, it has adhered to its narrow utilitarian ends.

The third conclusion follows from the second. The possibilities of the high-school commercial course, either as a utilitarian or as a social course, have not been realized, or if they have been realized that realization has not been expressed by an adequate organization of work. A conception of business as a vast social enterprise and the teaching of business from this point of view suggest a plan

for a study of society more basic than is attempted in any high-school course or even in the courses of many colleges. Such a conception of business, with the corollary that business technique can be intelligently practiced only with some knowledge of the enterprise as a whole, has nowhere found expression in the organization of commercial courses.

The possible organization of a commercial course based upon such conceptions of business must, however, wait for later consideration.